



ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN HARDY

"I T will seem a little like dying, won't it?" grimly commented Miss Agatha Holt, pausing to contemplate, as though for the first time, her immediate future.

Miss Emily, in the opposite corner of the fragrant little sitting-room, that was unacquainted with other disorder than the present quite legitimate one of packing, was wrapping with delicately conscientious fingers certain precious bits of china. The windows were open, and there surged gently in a relaxed June atmosphere. The draperies at doors and windows stirred sleepily.

"Rather more like heaven, Agatha," amended Miss Emily, in a thin, girlish voice that was not so incongruous, after all, with the unmistakable gray bands in her brown hair. It was not unlikely that this lovable lady would remain an *ingénue* to the brink of senility. Then something in Miss Agatha's expression made her add: "Now, if you're going to regret it, dear, we won't 'retire' at all. It's not too late. Perhaps we might not get together as large a school next year, but—"

"Nonsense!" brusquely interrupted the other, accelerating the executive precision of her packing. "I want nothing of the sort. There's no sweeter sorrow than parting with text-books and kindergarten cubes. Then I haven't the anguish of a schoolroom full of shorn friendships, as you know, dear. Oh no, I've never been 'dear teacher'! It isn't that. But to me, because I am well and strong, there is, perversely enough, something like humiliation in confessing, at fifty-three, that one has hung up one's tools for good. Why, one almost despises oneself!"

"I don't, Agatha," protested Miss Emily, putting on her glasses for a closer study of Miss Agatha's mood.

"I know; it's because you're fortunate enough to be consistently feminine. You appreciate that we are about to enter upon a dignified and harmonious spinsterly existence, whose pleasures we have amply earned. Well, so do I, and I naturally want to live up to my opportunities. Only, I have rough corners, you know, Emily, and I don't doubt you'll feel them sharper than ever, now."

"But that's something to be proud of, my dear," Emily gently chirped. "Most people's corners are worn smooth in the schoolroom."

"Poor darling!" Where her idol was concerned, Miss Agatha's pity overflowed at a word. "They did sandpaper you, the little wretches! You always were absurdly soft, Emily, and the schoolroom is no place for softness. I shall never become reconciled to your having missed your proper background, which, as I've told you often enough, would have been fireside domesticity. Don't talk to me of destiny!"

But indeed Miss Emily appeared to have no wish to. Her lack of zest in a discussion of this order was always indicated by some sweet irrelevance. "Agatha, have we any more tissue-paper?" served the purpose at this point.

For a week past, the atmosphere in the little flat had been singularly vibrant; the week, that is, since school had closed—with a definite, final snap, this time—and preparations for the summer flitting had begun. These latter were based, it is true, on an exaggerated estimate of the ravages that may be wrought in a summer by the moth and rust that do corrupt domestic treasures; but any less stalwart battery of defence would have failed to accommodate the ladies' delicately balanced consciences to the enjoyment of

their approaching summer in Gloucester, with its delights, familiar now these many years, of wandering over wind-swept moors, intelligently admiring sunsets and storms, reading up neglected volumes of history and experiencing contact with the sublimated cultivation of Massachusetts. The "retiring" from their profession, the flurry of an unaccustomed concern with matters of finance, the ritualistic elaboration of their packing,—these had, in combination, imparted to the two ladies an extraordinary state of tension, an unnatural aliveness to what was going on about them. Twelfth Street, upon which they had looked daily for years, had, as Miss Agatha said, a "final" look, though they were certainly returning in the autumn. And their friends bade them farewell for the summer—though this, again, was but their distorted perception of it—as though the two ladies were already remote from the familiar currents. What more natural, under these stimulating circumstances, than that Miss Agatha should have been driven, from mere "nerves," to frequent caustic comments?—or that Miss Emily should have timidly confessed that only twice before within her memory had she been so emotionally torn up by the roots:—once, when she had secured her first position as teacher, and again, when she and Agatha had made their first trip to Europe, bent on a decorous tour of the English cathedral towns.

For twenty-five years, it should be understood, this delightful pair had worked side by side. For fifteen years a certain door had borne the legend: "Miss Holt and Miss Vanderkoep: Classes for Young Children." As "Miss-Holt-and-Miss-Vanderkoep" they were, indeed, invariably known. Socially or professionally, the concept of them was single rather than dual. When, at half past eight in the morning, two persons of authority would approach the schoolroom, one slight, smiling, tranquil, one taller, breezier, and, to the infant mind, infinitely more terrible and "sarcastic"—appalling characteristic in a teacher!—those members of the "classes for young children" who were lingering reticently in the background, would exchange the unnecessary observation, "Here come Miss-Holt-and-Miss-Vanderkoep!" When the mothers of these very young persons wished to confer, as it were, a social nod upon the accomplished instructors, phrases of affectionate condescension would invite "My-dear-Miss-Holt-and-Miss-Vanderkoep." To their friends, to

their butcher, to their clergyman, to their janitor, they were, always, "Miss-Holt-and-Miss-Vanderkoep." So, quite naturally, the devoted pair, though by no means lacking in individuality, had long ceased to think of themselves as divisible, and it seemed probable they would continue indefinitely, "Miss-Holt-and-Miss-Vanderkoep."

Once in serene possession of the recuperative joys upon which they had so properly counted, the monumental fact of their "retirement" acquired a certain agreeable dimness. There were moments when Miss Agatha and Miss Emily almost forgot that they had attained the parting of the ways,—that chill, academic routine lay behind, and graceful and improving leisure lay before. It was incredible that it should have been so disconcerting, after years of longing, to be brought face to face, at last, with the opportunity for graceful and improving leisure!

Invariably, heretofore, the two ladies had returned to town on the fifteenth of September, a date that is widely conceded to be appropriate and dignified. This year, when the eighth of September came, Miss Agatha asked, a little nervously, "Have you begun to pack yet, dear?"

Miss Emily tried to pretend she did not understand.

"My dear, we've always gone back on the fifteenth. I—wrote Hotchkiss we were coming then. He asked, you know, about the floors."

"I've always fancied it must be wonderful here in October," said Miss Emily, sentimentally. "You know we've so often wished—"

"I know." Miss Agatha appeared to be reflecting. "To me, I confess, it seems a little absurd to stay over an extra six weeks simply for the idle consideration of landscape. Still, Emily, if you really wish to— And what in the world did we 'retire' for if not to do exactly as we please?"

Miss Emily paused in her turn. "Well, then," she said, with the air of one making an original observation, "let us go on the fifteenth. Will you see about the stateroom, Agatha?"

The economical decision of the previous June to do without a maid was a thousand times mentally applauded by Miss Agatha, who was quite ready to confess to herself that she would otherwise have found the autumn days uncomfortably long; and who, as it



was, quite immoderately indulged herself in the riotous pastime of sweeping the rooms. All the drudgery, indeed, of the new regimen was firmly appropriated by Miss Agatha, and for two reasons. It helped, she thought, to justify an existence that now seemed sadly purposeless; and it secured her the happiness of seeing Emily's slender, ladylike hands engaged in the lighter and showier of the domestic tasks. Emily in conjunction with the breakfast china or the linen-closet was a spectacle peculiarly appropriate and charming; while at a glimpse of Emily preparing a cake, fond-hearted Miss Agatha could have indulged, with all the zest in the world, in just some such affectionate panegyric as pretty Ruth Pinch evoked, stirring together her immortal pudding.

In proportion as Miss Agatha felt the dreariness of exclusion from blackboards and chalk, primers and basket-weaving, and the sound of sweet, unreasonable little voices, she characteristically strove to keep a knowledge of her feeling from Miss Emily. It came about that certain topics were never mentioned between them. Agatha, who had always taken the lead, had the air of protecting the younger woman from—neither of them could have told what. Certainly not from this charming, unfettered life they had so long yearned for! Meanwhile, Agatha so tenderly feared that her friend suffered from conditions she herself had brought about that she did not even dare ask the questions that might have ended her suspense.

One day poor Agatha's clouded conscience lightened. "Emily darling," she exclaimed, "shouldn't you like to be at home to some of the children on Wednesday afternoons? It would please them, you know, they're so fond of you."

"Why, Agatha!"

"Should you like it?"

"I think it would be perfectly lovely," gushed Miss Emily, in all sincerity.

The success of the first of these cheerful if a trifle tumultuous occasions was complete. Agatha, who, after a brief welcome of the guests, had retired to the kitchen, ostensibly in the interests of domestic affairs, smiled and frowned alternately. "Poor Emily!" she anxiously commented. "She's happier with those children than she has been in six months. Poor dear!"

At breakfast, a few mornings later, Miss Agatha was unusually silent. "I've something very odd to tell you, Emily," she remarked at last. "I dreamed of you last night."

"Oh dear!" Miss Emily, hidden away in her bureau drawers, kept a "dream-book," and she well knew, from trustful consultation, just how direfully portentous it is to dream of—

"Oh, but this was a delightful dream," Miss Agatha hastened to assure her. "It was a dream of you and a baby. You've always had a Madonna look, you know,

Emily, but there you were all Madonna. I can see the little thing now with its sensitive wee face—it wasn't more than six months old—and a patrician dot of a nose and mysterious blue eyes. And what was most curious was that you seemed to exercise some uncanny maternal spell over it; for when it fretted you said—"Miss Agatha paused and smiled to herself at the tender absurdity of the recollection—"you said, 'Hush, Vanderkoep!'—and he hushed."

"Vanderkoep!" echoed Miss Emily. "And I always thought it would be such a good name for a boy. But, Agatha, what was the rest of it?"

"There was nothing else. Or if there was, I failed to realize it. Just you and Vanderkoep projected against space. There may, of course, have been—some other members of the family, but I didn't see them."

"How curious," gently commented Miss Emily, who, held in the thrall of this unusual narrative, had quite forgotten to drink her coffee. "And he was pretty?"

"Altogether charming. Not the plump Cupid type. One could fancy him developing into something really distinguished. Oh, I should know him anywhere, it was all so startlingly vivid. It seemed almost," she went on, with an effort to be quite explicit, "like a supernatural realization of what might have been, of what should have been. With such a very slightly different turn of the wheel, Emily,— Ah, how we all like to ponder on the 'ifs'!"

Miss Emily reflected a little. "How soft and sweet they are, aren't they?" she said, tenderly. "Babies, I mean."

"Very," agreed Miss Agatha.

Again and again through the day Agatha found her friend regarding her with a kind of silent eagerness. And, though affecting not to notice this, she too discovered, a little to her discomfort, that the impression of her singular dream was strangely slow to fade.

It was with a greatly disquieted air that she came to breakfast the next morning.

"Did you sleep well, dear?" inquired Miss Emily, with a new timidity.

"Not in the least well. A succession of nightmares. And when I've been dieting, too. It's preposterous!"

"Why didn't you call me?"

"It's precisely what I did, and frantically, in my sleep. I have passed my night, Emily, in a mad chase after that baby of yours, that Vanderkoep. If you will believe me, he fell down-stairs before my very eyes!"

"Oh, Agatha!"

"But I picked him up, and when I found he wasn't killed I put him in a hot bath as a restorative. However, he almost drowned himself, for he was so smooth and slippery I couldn't hold him. Emily, I must ask you to give me another cup of coffee and to make it strong. I feel a literal fatigue."

"And there was no one with him?"



"You reappeared at last, and when you took him in your arms you both looked so pretty I couldn't scold either of you!"

"Was he good when I took him?" asked Miss Emily, as if she were sure of the answer.

"Perfectly. Did I tell you, Emily, that the child has beautiful eyes? And one of his dimples corresponds with that one of yours that you ought to have outgrown long ago?"

"What kind of sounds does he make?"

"Why, something like this,"—Miss Agatha obligingly made a desperate endeavor to imitate the formless gurgles of the dream-baby.

"Of course," beamed Miss Emily, in complete approval. "How dear he will be when he talks," she added, unconsciously.

Agatha looked up in wonder. Nor did her later reflections on this conversation prove reassuring.

Meanwhile, the dream-baby maintained in the family interests a prominence altogether unaccountable. Peculiarly susceptible to his shadowy fascination, Miss Emily expressed her affectionate absorption by the most significant of omissions. For the first time in her life, she neglected her embroidery, and it became her inexplicable habit to sit idle, almost motionless, through several hours. Or, adroitly succeeding in the introduction of Vanderkoep as a subject of conversation, she would devote herself to a strained effort to transfer from Miss Agatha's mental vision to her own every detail of the tantalizing image.

At close intervals Miss Agatha—oh, quite in spite of herself! for she had vowed that she would never dream of Vanderkoep again, and had forsworn her nightly glass of milk, lest that modest nutriment be responsible—had further visions of the engaging phantom who, in his peculiar and insubstantial fashion, had made himself so integral a part of the little family. And with each dream her perception of him became more consistently rational; there were no lurid escapes from sudden deaths in these later visions. And while, actually, Miss Agatha had never conspicuously succeeded in expressing her sympathy with children, having been, indeed, through all her pedagogical experience, rather hopelessly at odds with them, with Vanderkoep she got on a singularly satisfactory footing. He would, she lamented, never sit in her lap with the same look of rapturous content that he wore while held in Emily's tenderly maternal embrace. But his

amiable, if picturesquely incomplete remarks showed that there were no reservations in his affection; and the most harmonious understanding pervaded those intangible domestic scenes where Emily and the baby, an altogether radiant picture, would suffer Agatha to sit by, their happy and admiring complement.

Secretly, however, the fact that the dreams became increasingly unlike dreams was a matter of serious concern to Miss Agatha, that most sensible and clear-headed of women, that substantial compound of keen humor and broad common sense! Dreams with the magnificent incoherence of ordinary, familiar dreamland, she could have tolerated; but visions that dared again and again to shape themselves into so audacious—and, yes, so bewitching!—a semblance of reality, beset her with vague terrors. She had become far too expert in the uncanny business for her sadly disturbed peace of mind.

It might have been expected that Vanderkoep's progress in life would be by unnatural fits and starts, something after the manner of the immortal Alice. Quite on the contrary, his development kept pace with the calendar; and his accomplishments, as the months went by, corresponded precisely with the measure of his existence. He crept, sat erect, and otherwise asserted himself at, in each case, the normal period. It is true that neither of the two ladies could have divined this gratifying fact; but having formed the habit of jotting down Vanderkoep's exploits in an ornate book designed for that purpose, and blushingly bought by Miss Emily at a department store, they discovered, on comparing these notes with the information given each month in *Baby and his Ways*, the magazine for which Miss Emily had promptly subscribed, that there was absolutely nothing to criticize in the dream-baby's development. "Though what we should do about it, if there was, Heaven only knows!" Miss Agatha had remarked in a candid outburst that quite wounded sensitive Miss Emily.

One day Agatha came in from a meeting of the "Municipal Government Club" which she had joined on the assurance of its president that it would "enrich her life," and found Emily sedulously erasing the evidence of tears. Suspicion flew like an arrow and hit the mark.

"I suppose it's that baby again," groaned Agatha.



"He hasn't done anything," sobbed Emily, in superfluous defence of the dream-baby. "I suppose it's his not really belonging to me that I mind so much. And then, I might as well tell you, Agatha, that the worst of it is—that nobody ever had a baby before without being able to make clothes for it!" Here the poor lady's grief quite overcame her.

"Hush, hush, dear!"

"I want to sew him a little dress more than I want anything, Agatha! And you know how beautifully I could make it. I have thought how I should have it cut square, so as to show the exquisite back of his neck. You were telling me yesterday how I loved to kiss him there. . . . Agatha!"—Emily was very timid—"what should you think if I bought, —well, perhaps not a dress, but some flannel and made him a little jacket, just to please myself?"

"Emily, I beg of you never to talk in this way again. I blame myself beyond all telling. Please, dear, let us try to forget it all!"

The sobbing figure seemed not to hear. "Agatha," she said, "I want you to promise me something,—that you will never keep from me anything in regard to Vanderkoep. It is my right to know everything and at

once. So you must not only tell me, but it must be immediately, the next morning—whatever, whatever, it may be."

Agatha, whose affection for her friend was ever her line of least resistance, succumbed.

"Why, yes, dear, I promise," she agreed, nervously. "Let me make you some tea."

Within the few months of Vanderkoep's spectral existence there had at times threatened to appear—though the admission could not have been wrung from either of the two friends—a narrow rift within the exquisitely close tissue of their intimacy. The lack was perhaps not so much of understanding as of sincerity, of outspokenness, between them; and Miss Agatha, who suffered excruciatingly from the knowledge of this, was also painfully aware of the cause. Quite unconsciously, Emily was jealous of her more intimate knowledge of Vanderkoep. And why, thought the unhappy Agatha, should she not be? How grotesquely cruel it was that Emily should always be obliged to learn at second hand of Vanderkoep's countless physical perfections and delicious infant waywardnesses! that she should be denied the mirrored joy of once holding her own dream-baby in her arms! It was so simple a thing to dream—why might

not poor dear Emily yield herself to at least one radiant delusion?

Early in May, according to the arithmetic of Miss Agatha's visions, Vanderkoep attained the dignity of his first anniversary. Truthful and conscientious to a fault, she communicated the report of this festival, though with an evident unwillingness.

"We will let the china wait a little," said Miss Emily, with determination. "Sit down and tell me all about it. What did he say?"

"He said 'mamma,'" replied Miss Agatha, with the tender patience of one teaching the

him a dozen. One was a fine bay horse, harnessed into a cart, with real harness and all that. It seemed to delight him particularly."

"Boys always love horses so," said Miss Emily, wisely.

"And though I tried to make him come to me, he wouldn't. He stayed with you and cuddled."

Thus was the narrative continued and pieced out and refitted and every least detail adjusted to its place. At the close of which Miss Emily put on her glasses and sat down at her desk to enter faithfully into the book



blind, "and hugged you with that happy little scream of his."

Miss Emily nodded.

"And then he laughed mischievously, showing all his cunning little teeth."

"Five of them," interjected Miss Emily, accurately.

"And when I tried to find out what pleased him so much, I saw that he was holding tightly under his arm a toy elephant—"

"Where had he gotten it?"

"Why, it was one of his birthday presents from you. I think you must have given

devoted to Vanderkoep the full and unbridged history of his first birthday.

A few days later the first prolonged heat wave swept blighting over the city.

"I think we cannot get away too soon, Emily," observed Miss Agatha. "How fortunate it is we haven't to wait till June!"

Miss Emily said nothing.

"What do you think, my dear?" pursued Miss Agatha.

"I suppose I might as well say, now," said Miss Emily, "that I think we cannot go out of town this summer."

"But why?"

"Because of Vanderkoep," Miss Emily came out flatly.

"Well?"

"His very existence is exclusively associated with our rooms here. Do you feel confident, Agatha, that if we went away and interrupted our psychic connection with these surroundings—I hardly know how to put it—"

"I know I should dream of Vanderkoep anywhere," declared Miss Agatha, wearily.

"But how do you know? Have you ever been able to control—"

"No," confessed Miss Agatha.

"And yet you would venture—"

"It would make you unhappy, would it not, Emily, to go away?" interrupted Miss Agatha, to whom these discussions were painful, she could not tell why. "Very well, then, we will stay. I suppose we would better have a maid in for the summer."

So, through the listless warmth of May, the determined heat of June, and the relentless blaze of July, the two ladies lingered on in the little flat in Twelfth Street. There was little enough to interest or stimulate. Existence itself seemed a perfunctory and in no way desirable affair. The two ladies availed themselves to the fullest of their library subscription, corresponded with friends spending the summer in Europe—and talked of Vanderkoep. Miss Agatha proved herself of heroic stuff by suppressing her almost intolerable longing for cool air and the smell of the sea; Miss Emily suffered the heat and discomfort in significant silence.

During the first week of August came the crisis of the summer's feverish violence. The ominous stillness associated with extreme heat pervaded places where hitherto one had been conscious of nothing but noise. The torrid, throbbing nights were less to be borne than the burning days; sleep, except in snatches, was impossible. From the whole stricken city seemed to rise continuous, unlovely exhalations of sickness, suffering, death.

Miss Emily's never too robust strength yielded to the cruel heat, and for days Miss Agatha nursed her faithfully. During one feverish evening, in particular, when no night coolness came to bring relief, Miss Agatha spent all her strength in the effort to gain a little comfort for her friend. At midnight, exhausted, she lay down without undressing

in her own room and slept till dawn. When she awoke, it was with a cry. Miss Emily, lightly dozing in the next room, heard it.

"What is it, Agatha dear?" she asked. Receiving no answer, she called again, then went into Agatha's room. Her friend was sitting upright with a curious expression on her tired face.

An almost supernatural intuition directed Miss Emily's challenge, "You have been dreaming of Vanderkoep!"

"I am not myself, Emily." Miss Agatha began to talk very fast. "It's the heat. It muddles one's head so. I'm really not responsible. I'm not, indeed. Don't talk of it, Emily. Let us wait till another time."

"I know," said Miss Emily. "You need not tell me. He's dead. My baby's dead." She went and stood by the window and looked vaguely out. "What killed him?" She turned sharply to Miss Agatha.

"Emily, I feel like a murderer!" she broke out. "Don't, don't!"

"What killed him?" persisted Miss Emily, in a hard voice.

"Darling—he died from a fever. I think it must have been the heat. We did everything for him. He did not seem to suffer, Emily!"

Miss Emily said nothing, but continued to stand by the window. Her back was rigid. She wrung her hands incessantly.

"Emily," begged Miss Agatha, clasping her about the shoulders, "you must not suffer so. It is not too late. Listen, dear,—you must wait until I can get a strong sleeping-powder from the drug-store. Then I shall take it and let it put me to sleep, and I shall dream—of course I shall. I shall dream him back again. I know, Emily, that this was not a true dream. You see, dear, the heat and all!"

"And could that comfort me—that you should dream a lying dream? What are you doing to me, Agatha? Why should you want to lie to me, now, when my baby's dead?"

Outside, in the street, there was the first stir of day. Miss Emily, ignoring her friend's entreaties, hurriedly dressed herself, tied a veil neatly over her hat and buttoned her cotton gloves. Then, still in silence, she went to the outer door and turned the knob.

"Emily!" cried the agonized Miss Agatha, "where are you going?"

Miss Emily paused a moment. "Why, I am going," she said, steadily, "to get some flowers for my baby."